GREAT FIND ATTHEBES

There were tomb raiders before Lara Croft. The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb gripped the world's imagination. GEORGE PENDLE tells of *The Times's* great scoop

The above headline ran in *The Times* on November 30 1922. The location was the Valley of the Kings, the report filed "by runner to Luxor". Lord Carnarvon's archaeological expedition had breached the tomb of the little known boy pharaoh named 'Tutankhamun'. It would turn out to be the archaeological discovery of the century.

Lord Carnarvon and the archaeologist Howard Carter, had been excavating in Egypt since 1908 with some notable, if not earth-shattering, successes. However they lacked a concession to work in the much investigated 'Valley of the Kings' near Luxor. Finally, in 1914, they got their chance. Other excavators abandoned the site, believing that it held no more secrets. However Carter was convinced that certain relics previously found in the valley pointed towards the existence of an undiscovered tomb. He knew that it was nearby but for years his searching went in vain.

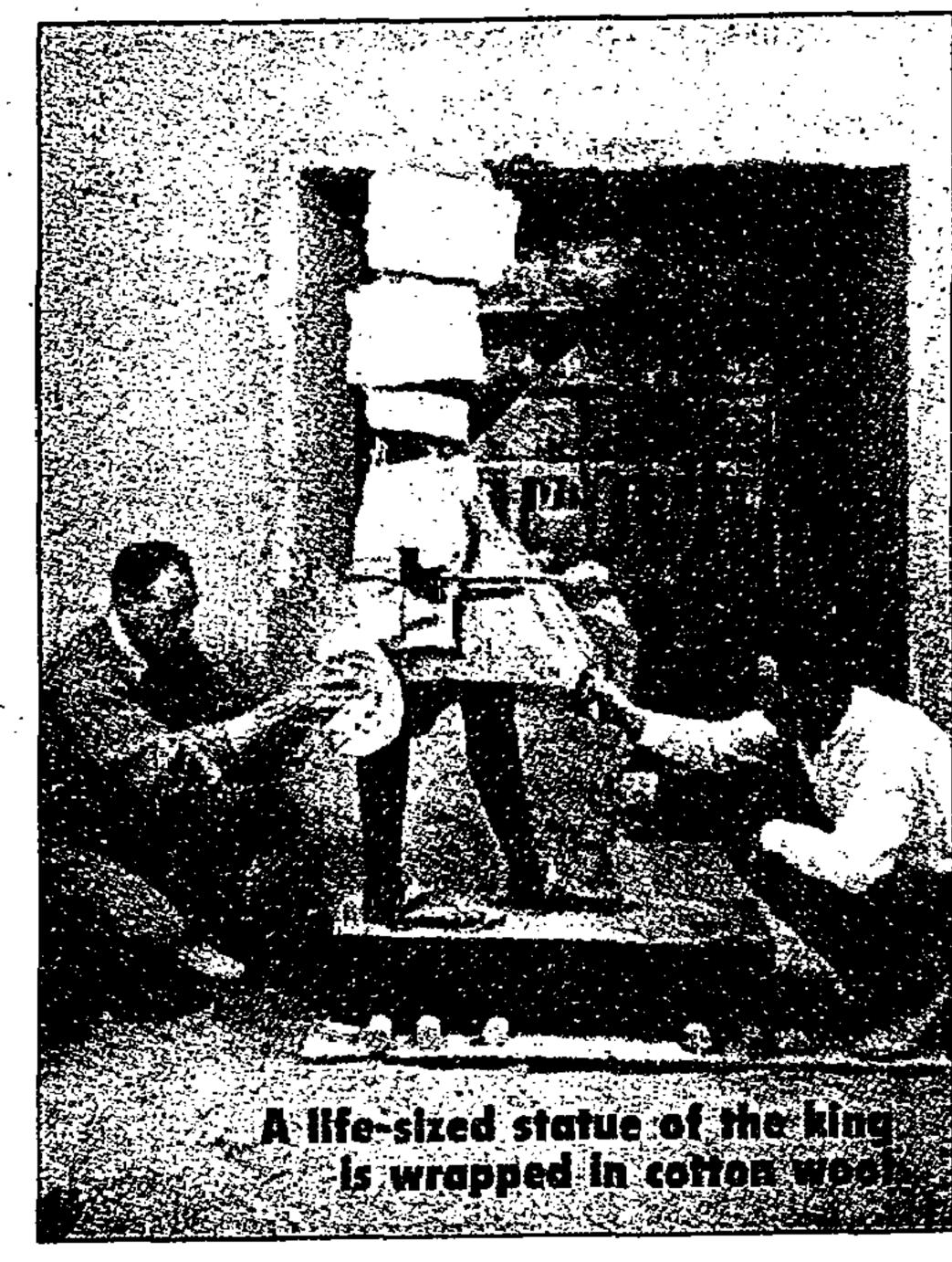
The war interrupted their research and The Times reported that the pair had "...almost despaired of finding anything," when in early November 1922 Carter discovered a step cut into the rock below the much visited tomb of Rameses IV. It turned out to be part of a flight of steps leading to a walled up entrance. Carter telegraphed to Lord Carnarvon, who at once came out from England. Nobody knew quite what would lie within

On the afternoon of November 25, 1922, almost eight years after they had first started excavating the valley, Carter and Carnaryon stood in the underground passage facing the sealed door. Carter warned of possible disappointment; there were traces of resealing on the outer door meaning its contents might have been looted - the fate of many of the tombs. Taking a steel probe, Carter worked a hole in the plaster. With trembling hands he widened the opening so that he could see, first holding a lighted candle in front of the gap to test for possible dangerous gases. Then he peered through. Some moments passed in silence. Lord Carnarvon asked nervously if he could see anything. Carter remained silent. Finally he replied in a whisper, "Yes....wonderful things".

Just how wonderful *The Times* describes in breathless tones, "...three magnificent state couches, all gilt, with exquisite carving...the State Throne of King Tutankhamun, probably one of the most beautiful objects of art ever discovered...two life-sized statues of the King, with gold work holding a golden stick and mace...four gold chariots". Hundreds of artefacts lay within and this was not all – a sealed chamber lay ahead of them. Speculation raged as to what lay

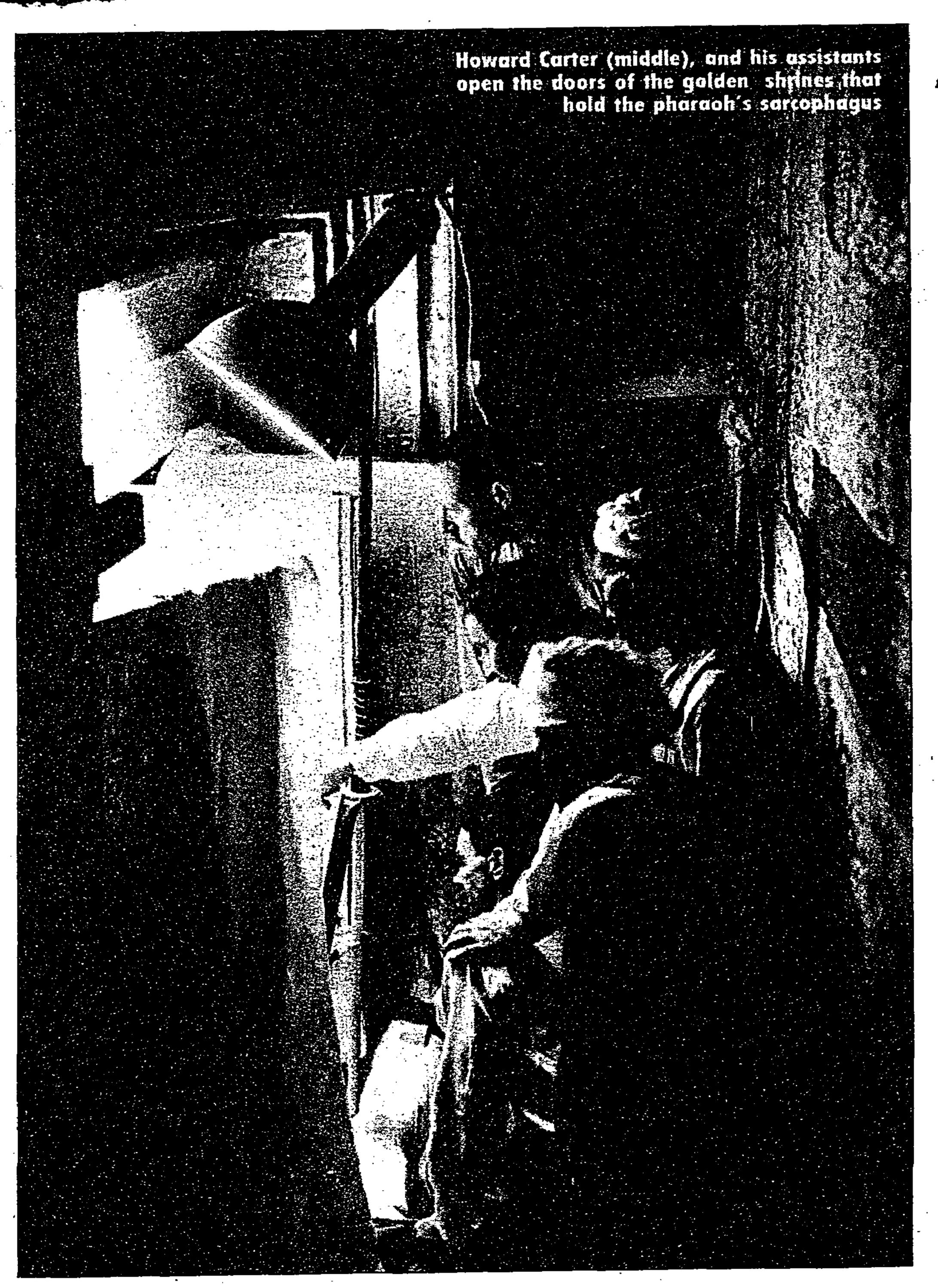
within. Was it empty? Was it a treasure hoard? Was it the pharaoh's mausoleum? Nobody would know until the first room was entirely cleared from its confusion of antiquities.

Lord Carnarvon, realising that the sudden rush of public interest threatened to overwhelm the excavation, decided to channel all news from the dig through one newspaper. In a letter to Howard Carter he stated, "I think The Daily Mail would give more, but The Times is, after all, the first newspaper in the world," Thus was created not only one of the first examples of chequebook journalism (The Times agreed to pay Lord Carnarvon £5,000 and 75% of the net profits for the rights), but also one of the most exciting running stories of all time.



Every day there were new reports of artefacts being brought out of the tomb: tables, beds, robes and statues of the finest craftmanship were paraded in front of crowds of onlookers. The inner sanctum was opened on the 17th February 1923. The Times described it as "the most extraordinary day in the whole history of Egyptian excavation". Three shrines lay inside, one within the other, guarding the undisturbed sarcophagus of the king. Gold glinted everywhere.

Yet Lord Carnarvon would never get a chance to see his pharaoh face to face. On 5 April 1923 he died in Cairo – a mosquito bite, reopened whilst shaving, became infected. At the exact time of his death a power cut was said to have struck the city and back on the Earl's estate in England, his terrier, pining for its master, suddenly dropped dead. The fevered interest that Carnarvon's find had induced led to talk of a Pharaoh's curse. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle warned that, "an evil elemental may have caused Lord Carnavon's fatal





illness. One does not know what elementals existed in those days, nor what their form might be. The Egyptians knew a great deal more about these things than we do". Unconfirmed reports were touted of an inscription found in the tomb that warned, "Death shall come on swift wings to him that toucheth the tomb of pharaoh".

Carter cared nothing for the rumours and carried on, recording every detail of the tomb. It was not until the end of 1925 that the pharaoh's sarcophagus was finally opened and the greatest treasure revealed. There lay three mummiform coffins, one inside the other. The

innermost coffin was covered in bejewelled gold sheet. Inside this lay Tutankhamun's mummy, his head covered by the funerary mask of solid gold with eyes of quartz and obsidian.

By the end of the year the wrappings were removed and the body examined whilst his coffin was taken to Cairo. Devoid of his burial gifts, stripped of his mask, Tutankhamun was left in his tomb. A sad end perhaps, but after 3275 years his name had become immortal. www.the-times.co.uk/lara/ has more on The Times's coverage and exclusive reproductions of the original reports #

